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ABSTRACT

This study examined the level of professional community in seven urban elementary schools that served large proportions of low-income students and that had engaged in innovative, schoolwide professional development and reform. The study points out to what extent and in what ways professional development at each school addressed professional community and the other dimensions of school capacity. Schools were chosen to represent different approaches to professional development and different kinds of assistance from district, state, and independent providers. Researchers made two to four visits to each school for up to 4 days at a time, observing professional development activities and classroom instruction, interviewing school and district staff and external providers of faculty development, and collecting pertinent documents (e.g., achievement data and demographic and fiscal information). Data analysis indicates that urban elementary schools serving high percentages of low-income students can attain a healthy degree of professional community, and that professional development in such schools can strongly address professional community. Evidence from two schools suggests that professional community can be strengthened by either scripted approaches to professional development or more organic, school-based approaches. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

Professional Development that Addresses Professional Community in Urban Elementary Schools

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Professional Development that Addresses Professional Community in Urban Elementary Schools

I. Introduction

In our current research on professional development, teachers' professional community is at the heart of the matter. We argue that traditional approaches to professional development have largely failed because, at best, they focus only on teachers' *individual* learning while neglecting to help whole school faculties to integrate their learning for the collective advancement of students in that school. Individual teacher learning is, of course, the foundation for improved classroom practice, but teachers must learn to exercise their individual knowledge, skills and dispositions to advance the *collective* work of the school under a set of unique conditions.

From this perspective, the design of professional development itself should consider not only how individual teachers learn, but also how schools as organizations affect, and are affected by, teachers' learning. Thus, we have proposed a framework for the study of professional development, grounded in a conceptualization of key factors comprising school capacity. Student achievement is most directly affected by the quality of instruction, while instruction in turn is affected by school capacity (see Figure 1).[1] Dimensions of capacity include the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individual staff members; program coherence; technical resources; principal leadership; and professional community.[2] In this paper, we

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[1] Of course, many factors not listed in the figure also influence student achievement and the quality of instruction. These include organizational features such as school size, time for teachers to plan, and school autonomy from unreasonable bureaucratic constraint; school learning climate; the level of support from parents and community organizations; and school funding. Our point is not to offer a comprehensive model of all the factors that affect student learning, but to suggest that many factors influence instruction through their influence on school capacity. Viewing school capacity as the key to improved instruction offers a parsimonious way of interpreting how a long list of otherwise discreet factors may affect instruction.

[2] We offer this conception as a synthesis of ideas from different lines of research on school improvement and supported in part by Bryk et al (1998); Bryk, Lee & Holland (1993); Corcoran & Goertz (1995); Fine (1994); Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, in press Lee, Smith & Croninger (1997); Little (1982); Louis, Kruse, & Associates (1995); Newmann, King & Rigdon (1997); Newmann & Wehlage (1995); O'Day, Goertz, & Floden (1995); Smylie (1995). See King & Newmann (1999, 2000) and Youngs (2000) for elaboration of school capacity and the study of professional development to build school capacity.

present our conception of professional community, discuss why it is a key aspect of school capacity, explain how we measured professional community in the schools in our study, and outline some of our findings.

II. Conception of Professional Community

A school's capacity for high quality instruction and high, equitable levels of student achievement certainly depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual teacher. But in addition, teachers' individual knowledge, skills and dispositions must be put to use in an organized, collective enterprise. That is, social resources must be cultivated, and the desired vision for social resources within a school can be summarized as *professional community.*

Recent research has shown the importance of teachers' professional community for school reform. Drawing on the conceptual and empirical work of Louis, Kruse, Marks, and colleagues at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools,[3] a strong schoolwide professional community consists of (a) a clear shared purpose for student learning, (b) collaboration among staff to achieve the purpose, (c) professional inquiry by the staff to address the challenges they face, and (d) opportunities for staff to influence the school's activities and policies.

Louis and colleagues' (1995) initial conception of professional community entailed five elements. We have combined *shared norms and values* and *focus on student learning* into clear shared purpose for student learning to explicitly specify what the norms and values of a schoolwide professional community should address. *Reflective dialogue* has been modified into inquiry. While dialogue is often a main mechanism for collective inquiry among teachers, it can be superficial. Inquiry entails particular characteristics that are not always present in dialogue. At a minimum, it involves teachers talking to each other about their practice and how it relates

[3] See Louis, Kruse, & Associates (1995); Louis, Kruse, & Marks (1996); Louis & Marks (1998); Marks & Louis (1999); Newmann, King & Rigdon (1997); Newmann & Wehlage (1995).

to student outcomes, and being willing to disagree. Other criteria indicate more complex inquiry, such as inviting or searching for dissenting viewpoints; making taken-for-granted assumptions explicit and challenging them; analyzing data, knowledge, and information; reaching collective understanding or decisions; and sustaining a focus on a specific topic.

Deprivatization of practice is subsumed under collaboration and inquiry. We have added teacher influence, or empowerment, as a fourth aspect of professional community. While Louis et al. (1996) regarded school autonomy and shared decision making to be structural conditions that support professional community, we consider the extent of teachers' actual exercise of power and influence – through both formal structures for input or decision making and informal means – to be a defining aspect of professional community in a school. Together with the other aspects, the exercise of teacher influence is *collective* in nature, and may entail giving up *individual* autonomy and control.

III. Data Collection Strategies

The following research questions were among those addressed by our study:

1. What is the level of professional community in a small number of urban elementary schools that have engaged in innovative, schoolwide professional development and reform?
2. To what extent and in what ways does professional development at each school address professional community and the other dimensions of school capacity?

To address these issues, seven public elementary schools were selected through a national search for urban schools serving large proportions of low-income students. These schools a) had histories of low achievement but had shown progress in student achievement over the last three to five years, b) attributed their progress, at least in part, to sustained, schoolwide professional development,[4] c) participated in site-based management, and d) had

[4] We defined professional development as any formally planned activity intended to advance individual and collective staff knowledge, skills, or expectations in order to improve student learning. Professional development activities include attending conferences, taking university courses, and, of course, workshops or other activities involving outside authorities.

received significant professional development assistance from one or more external agencies.[5] All of the schools reported that in the early 1990s, more than 50 percent of their students scored below national grade level norms or minimum testing standards issued by their states or districts for reading and/or mathematics. Further, while the schools varied substantially with regard to enrollment, student demographic composition, and student mobility, the overall profile reflects many urban schools in the United States. On average, the student bodies of the schools were 54% African American, 25.5% white, 19% Latino, and 1.5% Asian, and 83 percent of the students were from low-income families. Average enrollment was equivalent to 547 students for grades pre-K through 5, and annual student mobility averaged 28%.

In addition to the four criteria above, the schools were chosen to represent different approaches to professional development and different kinds of assistance from district, state, and independent providers. For example, the emphasis in some schools was to implement programs of curriculum, instruction, and assessment that had been previously developed by external agencies. Examples include the Success For All program in reading and mathematics, the curriculum of Core Knowledge, and adoption of curriculum to meet state-specific assessment outcomes. In contrast, in other schools, professional development aimed more toward unique forms of school development using the Accelerated Schools model of strategic planning and inquiry or school-based development of student outcomes and assessments.

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But in our view, professional development activities also consist of common planning and release time for teachers to meet in committees, cadres, grade teams, and as a school as a whole, as well as opportunities to network with teachers from other schools. Each research visits coincided with significant professional development activities.

[5] We were interested in learning how professional development can be productively pursued in the context of persisting tensions between site-based management and efforts of external organizations, including districts and states, to influence schools.

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Our qualitative research involved data collection from spring of 1997 through fall of 1999. We made two to four visits to each school for up to four days at a time. Researchers observed professional development activities and classroom instruction, interviewed school and district staff as well as external providers of professional development, and collected pertinent documents including achievement data and demographic and fiscal information. Interviews at each school included the principal, teachers, and, staff members with direct responsibilities for professional development. Among teachers, we interviewed those who participated in the major professional development activities of the school, representatives from the different grade levels at the school, at least one who had important concerns about the school's program of professional development, and at least one new to the school.

To assess the level of professional community at a school, as well as the degree to which professional development addressed this aspect of capacity, we asked teachers, school administrators, and district personnel directly involved in professional development at the school questions such as the following. We note the elements of professional community that the questions informed us about.

- How would you describe the school's central mission and major goals? What are the most important programs or activities for achieving the mission? To what extent do teachers agree with these priorities and are committed to achieving them? *[shared purpose]*

- To what extent are faculty members involved in decision making about the nature and direction of professional development at the school? What has been your own involvement in these kinds of decisions? Has there been disagreement among the faculty on these kinds of decisions? If so, how has this disagreement been handled? *[influence, shared purpose]*

- Have there been any professional development activities you have been involved in over the last year or two, as a leader or participant, that you think have had significant impact on teaching or student learning? If so, please describe these (i.e., main goals, staff who participated, amount of time, and the kind of work done in the activity). *[collaboration, inquiry]*

- How many colleagues do you rely on consistently for feedback and constructive criticism on teaching, curriculum, and assessment? Please describe a recent experience with colleagues in which you experienced productive professional dialogue. *[collaboration, inquiry]*

We also asked individuals working with the schools as professional development providers[6] for their views on many of the above questions and also asked them,

- How well does the staff work together? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of staff collaboration, in your view? Please describe a recent example in which staff worked well together. *[collaboration, inquiry]*

Our observations of professional development activities included a narrative of each activity and the researcher's assessment of the ways and extent to which the activity addressed professional community and other aspects of capacity.

IV. Structure of Analyses

We conducted two stages of analysis to determine the level of professional community at each school, as well as the extent to which professional development addressed professional community over the course of the study. The first stage of analysis occurred after each school visit when research staff compiled field notes from their observations and interviews and wrote a report addressing the research questions of the study. At this stage of analysis, research staff were concerned with documenting interview responses and professional development activities that addressed one or more elements of professional community.

The second stage of analysis took place after the school visits had been completed and all of the school reports were written. We used the reports to code each school on several variables including the level of professional community at the time of the first visit and the final visit, and the extent to which each aspect of professional community was addressed by professional development over the course of our study. Research staff assigned individual

[6] Examples include university consultants in literacy, math, or Accelerated Schools; Success For All regional trainers; and staff members of local subject area institutes or academies.

ratings for each category; when there was disagreement, the ratings were discussed until consensus was reached.

In assigning ratings for the levels of professional community at the first and final visits, we examined all of the professional development activities that addressed shared commitment, collaboration, reflective inquiry, and/or empowerment as well as staff members' statements about the prevalence, frequency, and/or strength of each aspect of professional community. Research staff also considered whether professional development strongly addressed professional community at two or more points in time. To determine whether professional development "strongly" addressed one or more aspects of professional community, we examined the number of people involved, the amount of time involved, the quality of the activities, and the consistency of the topics over time.

V. Empirical results

Each school was rated low, medium, or high for each aspect of professional community at the first and final visit. Two schools, Renfrew[7] and Lewis, were rated medium or high on all aspects of professional community at both visits. Three schools, Kintyre, Wallace, and Carlisle, were rated medium (or close to medium) on professional community at both visits. Two schools, Falkirk and Pitlochry, were rated low on most aspects of professional community at both visits. We also examined whether professional development strongly addressed each aspect of professional community at less than two points in time, at two points in time, or at more than two points in time. Renfrew and Lewis again rated higher than the other schools. In this section, we discuss our findings with regard to three of these schools, Renfrew, Lewis, and Pitlochry.

Lewis Elementary served 78% Hispanic students, 15% white, and 7% African American, and 93% of its students received free or reduced-price lunch. We found high levels of shared

[7] School names are pseudonyms.

commitment and collaboration at Lewis throughout our study as well as moderate levels of reflective inquiry and teacher influence. The school had implemented Success For All (SFA) reading in grades K-5 and SFA math in grades 3-5. The common curriculum and instructional strategies used by teachers formed a solid base for shared commitment to clear learning goals. All 12 staff members that we interviewed stated that the school's main goals were to improve student performance in reading and math through SFA. Collaboration occurred through weekly meetings of grade-level teams, regular meetings with the SFA reading and math facilitators, and monthly team leader meetings with the principal. One teacher commented, *The climate here is that you're kind of an outcast if you don't want to be part of the team . . . At our grade-level meetings, we plan what we're going to do for the next week and how we're going to address school issues.*

Neither SFA- nor district-sponsored professional development emphasized reflective inquiry in the sense of teachers developing and critiquing ways of organizing curriculum or instructional strategies. Instead, most inquiry at Lewis was oriented towards examining how well teachers were implementing SFA reading and math. There were some opportunities for teachers to reflect on student performance, though, such as periodic meetings in which teachers discussed students' progress in reading. With regard to teacher influence over the SFA curriculum, most teachers indicated that SFA provided ample opportunity for them to exercise professional judgment and creativity. According to one teacher, *It's a structured program and we try to maintain the integrity of the program. In our view, there are many ways to explore adapting curriculum to fit SFA.* In terms of making decisions about the operation of the school, grade-level team leaders provided input based on discussions in grade-team meetings, but the principal made final decisions himself.

Renfrew Elementary served 44% Hispanic students, 38% white, 14% African American, and 4% Asian, and 54% of its students received free or reduced-price lunch. In contrast to Lewis, professional development at Renfrew was more organic and school-based. Each year, the staff developed or reaffirmed two essential questions in schoolwide institutes, which enhanced shared commitment and teacher influence. During our study, one essential question

addressed the inequitable pattern of achievement across different student groups. In addition, teachers collectively decided to focus on literacy achievement for a few years, and worked in grade-level teams to develop outcomes and assessments for reading comprehension and writing. Many staff at Renfrew also participated in inquiry groups on a regular basis which strengthened collaboration and inquiry. One teacher described her inquiry group as *a place where I feel safe enough to share what happened in my classroom and get honest feedback from colleagues about how I handled the situation, and ideas about what might be next steps.*

Each February, the grade-level teams reported on their efforts to address the essential questions to the whole staff. These mid-year institutes enabled teachers to discuss progress, problems, and possible solutions with their colleagues. As the school's principal noted, the inquiry groups and use of essential questions both promoted professional community and were mutually reinforcing. *When teachers are in inquiry groups, they talk very much about some of the things we're talking about* with the essential questions. *But it's private, there are norms of confidentiality, privacy, reflection . . . having those two strategies, they are very complementary and they really, really help.* In terms of empowerment, 10 of the 11 teachers interviewed during the first visit reported that teachers were sufficiently involved in making decisions about professional development, as did six of the seven teachers interviewed during the final visit. At the end of our study, shared commitment, collaboration, and teacher influence were at high levels while reflective inquiry was at a more moderate level.

Pitlochry Elementary served 97% African American and 3% Hispanic students, and 96% of its students received free or reduced-price lunch. Like Lewis, Pitlochry also implemented SFA reading and math. Despite high levels of shared commitment to SFA, though, Pitlochry had low levels of the other aspects of professional community throughout our study. During our first visit to the school, all nine teachers interviewed stated that Pitlochry was focused on improving literacy achievement through SFA. At our final visit, all six mentioned the school's attention to literacy and four added that math was also a major area of concentration. In terms of collaboration, SFA facilitators tended to interact with teachers one-on-one and meetings with

SFA trainers generally addressed the concerns of individual teachers. Although grade teams at Pitlochry had 30 minutes of common planning time each week, there was no expectation that teachers meet in teams to plan instruction or reflect on their practice. Consequently, collaboration at the school was low.

Observations and interviews revealed little evidence of inquiry other than questions about implementation of SFA. According to the school's SFA math facilitator, for example, the longer that teachers had worked with SFA math, the less assistance they wanted from him. As a result, many teachers missed opportunities to reflect with the facilitator on their experiences with the program. With regard to teacher influence, only four of nine teachers interviewed at the first visit indicated that they had been involved in the decision to adopt SFA. Further, only three of the six teachers interviewed at the final visit stated that they were sufficiently involved in making decisions about professional development. One commented, *We need more of those meetings where decisions are made. We need to have more teacher representation for feedback and input.*

VI. Implications

These findings indicate that urban elementary schools serving high percentages of low-income students can attain high levels of professional community and that professional development in such schools can strongly address professional community. In particular, evidence from Lewis and Renfrew indicates that professional community can be strengthened by either 1) scripted approaches to professional development such as that associated with Success For All or by 2) more organic, school-based approaches such as teachers' work at Renfrew to develop grade-level outcomes and assessments and reflect on their progress in addressing essential questions.

Nonetheless, a question remains: why is it important for urban elementary schools to have high levels of professional community? In considering this question, it is useful to think again about the experiences of the two schools in our study, Lewis and Pitlochry, that both

implemented Success For All. Professional development at Lewis appeared to have contributed to a high level of professional community at the school during our study as well as the school's steady improvement on state assessments in reading, writing, and math between 1993-94 and 1998-98. In contrast, professional development at Pitlochry helped build a strong shared commitment, but it did not seem to strengthen collaboration, reflective inquiry, or empowerment. Further, it appeared to have little impact on student achievement over the past five years. This suggests the need to consider other school organizational conditions including principal leadership and program coherence.

At Lewis, we found high levels of principal leadership and program coherence throughout our study. The principal was committed to structuring teachers' work around collaborative planning in grade-level teams and to whole-school development; i.e. the entire faculty working together on common goals and programs. To facilitate this, he arranged for common planning time for grade teams and gave priority to schoolwide and grade-team professional development, as opposed to providing opportunities for individual teachers to take workshops or courses of interest to them. In terms of program coherence, professional development at Lewis was focused and sustained on the school's mission of increasing student achievement through SFA. Further, SFA itself provided an instructional philosophy, curriculum materials, and assessments that were internally coherent.

On the other hand, principal leadership at Pitlochry did not address or strengthen any aspects of professional community other than shared commitment. As mentioned previously, there was no expectation that grade-level teams would meet during common planning time and many teachers felt they had insufficient input into decisions about professional development. In addition, district policy related to professional development may have weakened program coherence at the school. For example, Pitlochry's SFA math facilitator criticized the district for requiring teachers to attend workshops in math that were unrelated to SFA math, stating that teachers learned things that they couldn't implement in their classrooms. *If teachers are going to go to workshops related to math, they should be* SFA math workshops.

In conclusion, evidence from this study indicates that scripted and organic approaches to professional development can help urban elementary schools attain high levels of professional community. In order to understand, though, why professional development addresses professional community more strongly in some schools than in others, it is necessary to examine other dimensions of school organizational capacity including principal leadership and program coherence.

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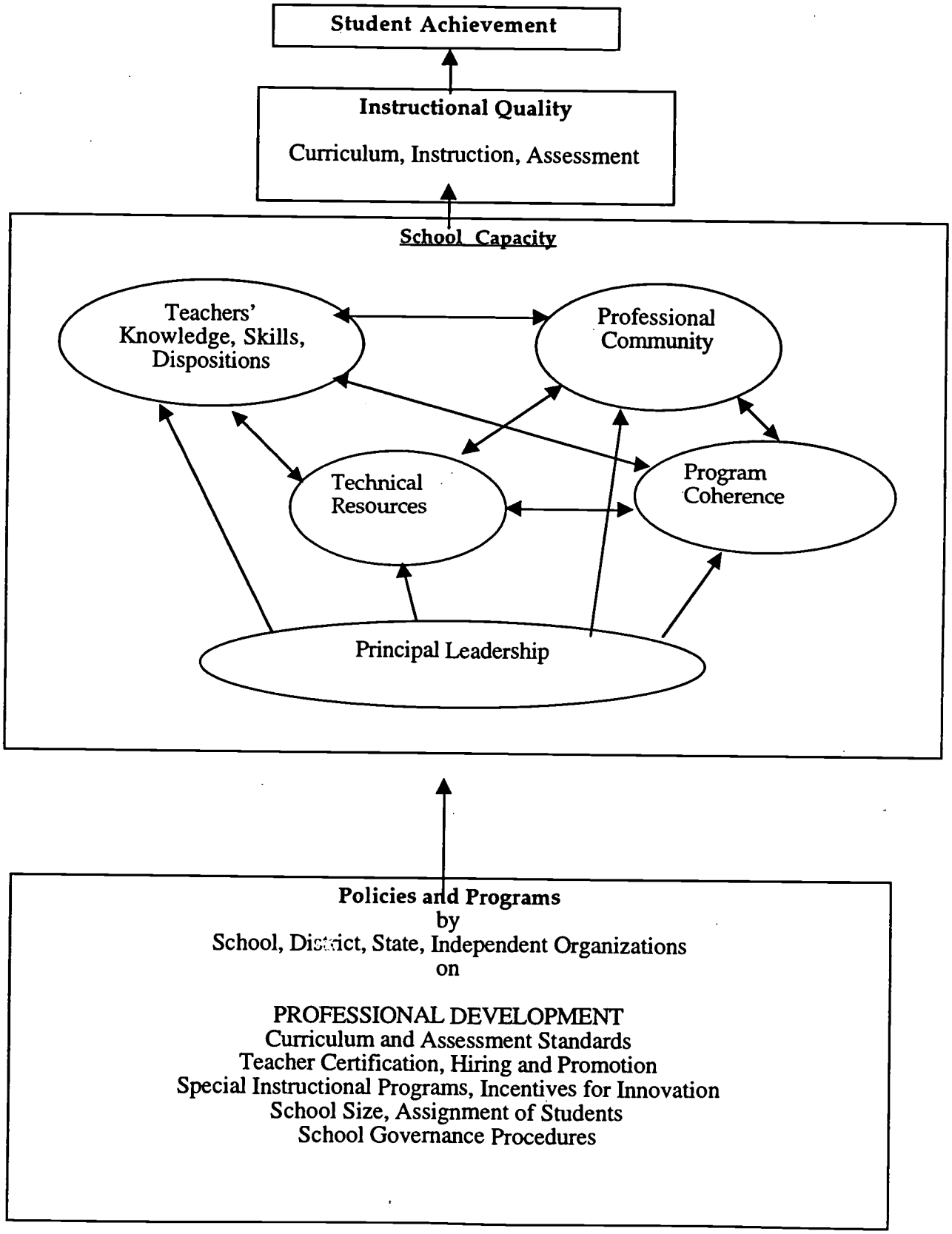
Figure 1

Factors Influencing School Capacity and Student Achievement



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